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ABSTRACT

This digest, which is based on findings from a large variety of studies, reviews the known effects of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 on children to date and discusses the Act's possible future effects. Federal statistics show a positive trend in poverty reduction, though other sources are not optimistic that the trend will persist, noting that former welfare recipients often get jobs resulting in no more family income than welfare payments and offering none of the health care or other benefits previously available through assistance programs. Transitioning workers often cycle in and out of employment, leaving their families without any earned income for periods of time and ineligible for government assistance. Families need disposable income to provide children with educational and recreational enrichment at home and offset the negative effects of living in disadvantaged communities. Many researchers assert that of all the potential benefits of welfare reform, the most important by far is increasing family income. Important public and family resources needed to support child development include options for improving school readiness, availability of after-school and summer programs, and efforts to improve parenting skills in order to support children's learning. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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WELFARE REFORM AND URBAN CHILDREN

The most commonly stated goals of welfare reform, as implemented through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), are a reduction of the number of individuals receiving financial aid and an increase in the number of people working (Ripke & Crosby, 2002). Supporters also anticipated a variety of benefits for those transitioning from welfare to work and for their families. With the reauthorization of the Federal legislation planned for Spring 2003, researchers are attempting to determine whether welfare reform is having positive developmental and academic effects on the children who lost assistance. They are revisiting the findings from evaluations of pre-PRWORA on welfare-to-work programs and from longitudinal studies of the effects of poverty on children. The researchers are then applying those findings to the circumstances of families impacted by PRWORA. They are also conducting new research on the effects of the Act. This digest, based on the findings of a large variety of studies, reviews the known effects of PRWORA on children to date, and discusses the Act's possible future effects.

Welfare Reform and Family Income

Ongoing Federal cash assistance to low-income families was ended in 1996 with the substitution of the PRWORA for previous welfare programs. The Act requires most adults to get jobs, but it also provides funds to states through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants for the support of people still eligible for welfare, and through additional allotments for child care. The states have some discretion in how they appropriate TANF funds (i.e., outright payments for five years or so, food stamps, job training), but in general less public money is available to increase the income and opportunities of poor families (Ripke & Crosby, 2002).

Statistics from a Federal government report (Federal Interagency Forum, 2002) indicate a positive trend in poverty reduction. The child poverty rate in 1999 and 2000 was 16 percent, down from a high of 22 percent in 1993, with the decline steepest for African American children in female-householder families. Slightly less than one percent of children resided in households reporting child hunger, although 18 percent lived with "food insecurity," percentages also lower than in previous years.

Other sources are not optimistic that the trend will persist. They cite these supporting facts: Former welfare recipients often get jobs resulting in no more family income than welfare payments and offering none of the health care or other benefits previously available through assistance programs. Transitioning workers frequently cycle in and out of employment, leaving their families without any earned income for periods of time and ineligible for government assistance. Many families therefore have less disposable income than previously (Ripke & Crosby, 2002; Zaslow et al., 2002). Further, as the economy continues to decline, even more newer and less-skilled workers will be jobless again (Weil & Finegold, 2002).

Families need disposable income to provide children with educational and recreational enrichment at home, and to offset the negative effects of living in underresourced and sometimes violence-prone communities. In urban areas, expensive housing, inferior schools, and high costs of living further increase the need for more income (Blum & Francis, 2002). Thus, many researchers assert that of all the potential benefits of welfare reform, the most important by far is simply an increase in family income (Sherman, 2001) because "[e]conomically secure children tend to be healthier and do better in school…[and] less likely to be involved in criminal behavior and more likely to graduate from high school and to earn higher incomes…" (Zedlewski, 2002, p. 123). Further, when coupled with increased income security, parents' acquisition of new skills, increased self esteem, and job stability and satisfaction can alleviate the family stress, emotional distress, violence, and dysfunction that can impede child development.

In many cases, though, the transition to work has not yet increased family income. Further, boring and frustrating jobs that pay little but leave workers ineligible for government subsidies, and play havoc with child care and home schedules, often increase negative parent behaviors and limit their ability to promote their children's development and education. Therefore, most researchers assert that supplemental funds to increase family and community resources for child development are still needed (Blum & Francis, 2002; Chase-Lansdale & Duncan, 2001; Ripke & Crosby, 2002; Weil & Finegold, 2002; Zaslow et al., 2000; 2002; Zedlewski, 2002).

Public and Family Resources to Support Child Development

School Readiness

PRWORA requires nearly all mothers with children age one or older to get jobs, and has increased the amount of Federal funds available for child care to promote compliance. To increase poor families' options, Head Start—the universally well-regarded Federal program which traditionally has been only a half-day activity with heavy parent involvement—is experimenting with new models to meet the needs of the growing number of working mothers. Indeed, studies consistently show that high quality child care providing early learning interventions, particularly for poor children, improves both school readiness and later learning; it is frequently superior to staying at home with a parent (Ripke & Crosby, 2002; Zaslow et al., 2002).

Still, even if families are able to take advantage of subsidies—which have proven to be difficult to get—good center-based child care, particularly programs with flexible hours to accommodate shift work, is hard to find, and it is disproportionately expensive for the poor. Thus, poor families remain heavy users of informal, unlicensed care with very minimal educational value (Ripke & Crosby, 2002; Zaslow et al., 2002).

Out-of-School Activities

Participation in after-school and summer programs enhances student academic achievement, supports the development of a wide range of competencies, and limits opportunities for delinquent behavior. However, even before their parents were required to work, poor children and adolescents were likely to spend less time engaged in structured activities than other children because their parents lacked the funds for private enrichment programs and poor communities lacked sufficient affordable public programs. Traditionally, they spent more time on their own, frequently watching television, a situation related to lower academic performance.

After-school programs can benefit poor youth by providing both supplementary education and a safe place to spend time with likeminded peers and supportive adults. But, as yet, funds to develop them in poor neighborhoods, and the disposable income to enable families to pay for the programs that do exist, have yet to materialize through welfare reform (Chase-Lansdale, & Duncan, 2001; Ripke & Crosby, 2002).

Academic Achievement

Information on the school performance of students whose families are transitioning to work results primarily from studies using data collected from parent surveys. Thus, while comprehensive statistics on important indicators are not now known, some potentially useful information is available.

One large research synthesis prepared by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MRDC) produced some disturbing information about adolescents in newly working families: "worse school performance, a higher rate of grade repetition, and more use of special education services" (Gennetian et al., 2002, p. 111). Its authors attributed these poor school outcomes to a lack of supervised after-school programs and youth's assumption of adult responsibilities at home, including care for younger children. While, overall, students did not experience higher dropout, suspension, or expulsion rates, these rates did rise for youth taking care of siblings.

Another evaluation based on MRDC's data reviewed younger children (Sherman, 2001) and showed more positive outcomes. Here, the author found gains in math scores and in teacher- and parent-rated academic performance for children whose families' income increased as a result of employment.

A study based on a comparison of children whose parents participated in welfare-to-work programs and a control group found that the children of parents in the program demonstrated a slight improvement in cognitive development and academic achievement (Zaslow, McGroder, & Moore, 2000). Its authors also suggested that improvements in parenting, a by-product of job satisfaction and the acquisition of a range of new skills, may result in additional achievement gains for children. But they cautioned that the control group children's lower performance might result from having higher risk parents (as indicated by their lack of selection for the program).

Effective job training has been shown to boost the ability of previously low-skilled parents to support their children's learning. PRWORA, as now promulgated, however, provides very limited adult training opportunities and usually does not allow cash assistance for parents in higher education (Ripke & Crosby, 2002; Zaslow et al., 2002).

Recommendations from the Research

Sherman (2001) demonstrated that every welfare-to-work program that lifted participants' average incomes by 5 percent or more had mostly good effects on children, whereas those that reduced income by at least 5 percent had mostly bad effects. Thus, according to the research findings discussed above, the success of welfare reform in terms of its ability to increase poor children's well-being may hinge on how well the government meets family shortfalls and implements the strategies needed to prevent negative effects from the tradeoff between more parent work time and less parent-child time. These additional supports include renewed assistance upon unemployment, increased and vigorous promotion of free and subsidized child health insurance and food programs, development of high quality child care alternatives, ongoing subsidies for parents unable to work, and assistance for currently disenfranchised immigrants.

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